

## What Are Criteria for Writing Essential Questions?

I have distilled the following list of criteria from hundreds of teachers around the country. The list suggests best writing practices for generating essential questions that will guide your learners and refine your teaching.

**1. Each child should be able to understand the question.** The essential questions are ultimately for your students. If the learner cannot understand the language of the questions, then the purpose is defeated. Sometimes we adults get carried away with our polysyllabic syntax. An example of such indulgence is a question a junior high teacher used for his Civil War unit: "What were the intellectual underpinnings of sectionalism?" This is not a question written for your average 7th grader. Simple sounding questions do not necessarily connote simple answers. In a 1st grade unit on snow, the teachers declared the first essential question as: "What is snow?" The question lent itself to a range of activities from looking at the snow cycle to considering the difference between natural snow and artificial snow made at ski resorts. In short, questions should be clear to your students.

**2. The language of the questions should be written in broad, organizational terms.** The questions are umbrella-like organizers and should reflect a heading for the focus of a set of activities. Consider the following question from a unit on ancient Greece: "What were the major contributions of the Ancient Greeks?" This makes clear to the learner that through the completion of many activities, they will learn much about the major contributions of the Greeks. However, a question like "What did Socrates have for breakfast?" lacks organizational power. If a question is too specific, it is probably an activity itself or the point of a classroom discussion.

**3. The question should reflect your conceptual priorities.** The essential question points to the essence of what your students will examine in the course of their study. What is the conceptual priority for them to write about, speak about, think about, and develop? Given the very real limits of time, we must make choices.

The essential question forces the teacher to choose the conceptual outcome for the students. If students negotiate the questions with the teacher, they are choosing as well. In short, if 1st graders examine "What is snow?", the teacher is setting as a conceptual priority an understanding of the nature of snow, its compositions, and its origins.

**4. Each question should be distinct and substantial.** If a set of questions is akin to a set of chapters in a book, then there should be enough power and substance to hold a "chapter" together. A question such as "What makes a leader?" will require a number of activities and experiences to engage the learner in an investigation. Contrast that with a question like, "What were Franklin D. Roosevelt's favorite books?" Although the question itself might make for an interesting discussion in one class session, it will offer little more than that. The previously cited snow unit for 1st graders had two distinctive essential questions: What is snow? How does snow affect people? This cues students that there will be a set of activities examining the nature of snow and another set examining how snow affects people.

**5. Questions should not be repetitious.** In my experience, repetitious questions are the most common error in curriculum design. In a unit on the tricentennial celebration of a New England town, the middle school teachers used four essential questions:

- What is change?
- What causes change?
- How does change affect people?
- How has change affected our town over 300 years?

The first three questions were repetitious, which explains the teachers' difficulty in figuring out where to place certain activities. Upon reflection, one of the teachers said, "How can one discuss change without looking at its causes and its impact on people? That's what change is!"

If there are repetitious questions, they should be collapsed into one question with subheads. The questions above were edited to read: What is the nature of change? How has change affected our community? Just as a book chapter should have distinct content integrity, so should each essential question stand on its own without being blurred into another question.

**6. The questions should be realistic given the amount of time allocated for the unit or course.** This is a pragmatic and critical decision that the designer must weigh. If you have three weeks to spend on a unit on China, the questions will most likely differ in number and kind from a three-month unit on China. It has been my observation that 2 to 5 questions is the average for a unit of study that ranges from 3 weeks to about 12 weeks. Too many questions overwhelm the learner.

**7. There should be a logical sequence to a set of essential questions.** The test of a good series of questions is that you are able to explain to your students the rationale for the sequence. If that rationale is not clear, learners will likely have problems. The sequence does not have to be rigid. A teacher can move through the questions and return to previous ones. However, the questions should have a sense of focus and direction rather than an arbitrary order.

**8. The questions should be posted in the classroom.** At first this criteria appears to be simply a helpful hint. But it is one of the most crucial variables in predicting long-term retention and understanding on the part of children. Posting the question is a public declaration. The message to the learners is: These questions are essential for you. The questions provide a constant visual organizer and focus for the learner—and for the teacher as well. The questions are a point of reference. When all the teachers participating in an interdisciplinary unit of study post the questions, the students have direct evidence that the teachers are not only talking with each other but share the view that the investigation of these questions is essential.